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The Hostage Who Loved Her

Candace Hammond Remembers William Buckley

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FARMER, N.C.—In February 1984, one month before he was taken hostage in Beirut, William Buckley placed an overseas telephone call to his longtime friend, Candace Hammond, at her house in this tiny hamlet in the rolling hills of Carolina. Candy-belle, as Buckley sometimes addressed her in his letters, had long since stopped wondering exactly what it was that Buckley did for a living. As far as she knew, he was working for the State Department at the U.S. Embassy in Lebanon, and hoping to come home soon.

She was sound asleep when the phone rang. He wanted to know if she'd seen him on the news, helping in the evacuation of American civilians from Beirut. "He said, 'Did you see me on television? I was helping people on the beach.'"

Then he told her of another event, one that never made the news but was, in the clear vision of hindsight, her first clue that Buckley had been playing a more dangerous game.

"He said his apartment had been bombed—not his apartment, but near enough to break all the glass in his windows," Hammond says. "And he took it as a personal affront. He said he knew who had bombed his apartment and he had telephoned them and told them he knew they had done it, and he would get them."

A month later, as he left for work on the morning of March 16, 1984, Buckley was forced out of his car at gunpoint and kidnaped.

Early news accounts of the abduction described him as first secretary of the embassy's political section. Much later it was reported that Buckley had been CIA station chief in Beirut, an expert on terrorism with extensive knowledge of CIA operations throughout the Middle East. He had been sent to Beirut the previous summer to rebuild U.S. intelligence operations after the bombing of the U.S. Embassy left several agency employees dead.

His capture by an Iranian terrorist group calling itself Islamic Jihad reportedly had caused great anguish at CIA headquarters and had prompted agency Director William J. Casey to approve what have been called "extraordinary measures" to obtain Buckley's release. His kidnaping is thought to have helped set in motion the series of events that led the Reagan administration to countermand U.S. policy by shipping arms to Iran. And his apparent death in mid-1985, after prolonged interrogation, torture and medical neglect, reportedly redoubled administration efforts to find and free the remaining American hostages, whatever the cost.

But that was all far in the future. The day after she learned of his kidnaping on the morning news, Hammond received a long letter from Buckley, written a few weeks earlier, thanking her for a box of valentine gifts:

"Beirut is its usual wild self with peace and our 'real' cease fire just around the corner," it read in part. "Unfortunately the sidewalk leading to that corner keeps slip-

ping away, and we never really nail down much with the multiple idiots and factions with whom we have to deal. It is a great and impossibly complex adventure, and I will therefore be very pleased if I get a break one day which will permit me to visit Farmer [and] burn all the wood in sight, have magnificent breakfasts, dinner at the steakhouse and of course, an opportunity to play around in the antique market. Or play with other toys if they are available and I am still able. I am aging and weakening fast on this assignment. Take care of yourself and keep the home fires burning . . ."

Candace Hammond is 5 feet 1 inch of sturdy, curvy energy. Her hair is swept back in a long, tawny braid that falls past the small of her back, and she dresses like a hip earth mother, in an antique tuxedo jacket with a rhinestone-and-pearl brooch pinned like a military honor over her heart. There is a crimson muffler wrapped around the collar of her flannel shirt; brown suede clogs peek out from the bell bottoms of her blue jeans. Her wide, green eyes sparkle when she laughs; she keeps her generous mouth lipstick bright pink. She has a biscuits-and-baby drawl and a determined air.

Her hands are rough and stained from the landscaping she oversees at High Point College. All week she's been hanging Christmas garlands around the campus, stiffening gilt bows and making Christmas angels, potting poinsettias. Now, sitting cross-legged with her back to a dying fire in the parlor of her old farmhouse, she spreads Buckley's letters around her like tarot cards and struggles to describe him and the way they were.

Was he independent?

"Oh my God," she says, nodding.

A loner?

"Yes," she says slowly. "Two independent, loner people together."

She fingers a post card of a Renoir painting, "Women Combing Their Hair." On the back Buckley wrote: "Reminds me of someone I know."

There is a Polaroid snapshot of the two of them wearing straw hats. Hers is set back on her head, and her smile is eager. Buckley is standing stiffly beside her, his mouth set in a line. His eyes are hidden in the shadow of his hat brim.

Some of the details escape her now. "He liked spy novels . . . and it seems to me he told me his father was retired Navy, and that he'd done something else before, when he first got married. Seems like I remember something about [his father] being a salesman." She frowns in frustration and looks embarrassed. "I really wish I could remember this stuff, but you know, you think a relationship's going to go on forever and there's no need . . ."

Candy Hammond met Bill Buckley 10 years ago at a neighbor's house when she went over to borrow a sleeping bag. He was 47 and, as far as she knew, a civilian employed by the Army and staying at Fort Bragg for the semiannual war games there. She remembers someone tall

and distinguished (he was 5 feet 9), with steel-gray hair and gray eyes.

"Piercing," she says now. "Sure could give you a dirty look." She was invited to stay for hamburgers, and afterward she decided she wanted to see him again. "Nice-looking bachelors in Farmer are not that frequent," she remembers, "so you nab onto them when you can."

As one of the local civilians recruited to play minor roles in the war games ("I was Nurse Candy; I kept telling them women are doctors now, I can be a doctor"), she tagged along on a convoy, then asked to be dropped off along a road where Buckley was scheduled to pass. "Damsel in distress," she explains.

"He said not to worry, he'd see I got home safely. And he did. He was intelligent, with a good sense of humor, alive, aware . . . and available."

Buckley went back north, but before he left, "he said, 'Would you like to come to Washington and visit?' and I said, 'Yes, I would love to,' and he sent tickets."

They began to visit back and forth, once a month, sometimes more, sometimes less. He didn't have a car, but he rented one when she came to town. On the first trip he took her to museums—"he called it 'Bill Buckley's Couth and Culture Course'"—but they quickly found a favorite pastime, prowling the antique shops around Dupont Circle, "going junking," she calls it. He bought her African carvings and Chinese silk. He took her to visit battlefields. They liked Kramerbooks for breakfast and the Prime Rib on K Street for dinner. He made reservations using his middle initial, as William F. Buckley. When the inevitably disappointed maitre d', expecting the columnist, stared, Buckley always said, "I'm the real one. The other one's counterfeit."

He wore dark suits and perfectly knotted ties. "Real dashing and debonair." And he could be courtly to the point of exasperation. "We'd get to a place and I would automatically open my door to get out, and he would come along and close it and say, 'I'll open the door.' And I'd say . . . 'I can open my own door, Bill.' And he'd say, 'When you're with me, I open the door.' So we'd have this little running battle . . . especially in the summer, because you turn the air conditioning off, and by the time he would waltz around the car I could have been dead."

She remembers walking home once after dinner. "I remember, um, wanting to dance in Lafayette Park one time, it was a gorgeous night, and I said, 'We can hum, we can make our own music!'" She grabbed his hand and took a few steps. "This did not go over. He started clearing his throat so much I thought he was going to rip something."

Buckley lived at the Embassy Suites, near Dupont Circle. "It was a man's apartment," she says. "He had real good taste. There was a rug he'd bought in China, and a big couch you could snooze on if you wanted to. He had a rocking chair he liked to sit in and rock. It was a teeny little apartment with *beaucoup* of stuff in it, a whole wall of paintings and memorabilia. I don't mean memorabilia about his work, but little things, from the Civil War."

In all of her trips to Washington, she never

met any of his friends. I used to ask him if he had any friends other than me, and he said yes, and I kept thinking, 'Well, where do you put them? Don't you know anyone?'

"And he just said yes, he did have friends."

He told her that he walked to work. She thinks she remembers him pointing to the Forestal Building one weekend, as they walked to the Smithsonian, and saying that was where his office was. She knew he worked long hours and that he traveled, often for weeks at a time.

"Dear Candy: Hot, dusty and tired, but I'm keeping out of trouble and fully occupied," he scrawled on a post card from Cairo dated Oct. 12 of an unknown year. "The pyramids are beautiful, dull and mystical . . . Should finish up here in 7 to 10 days if we stay on schedule!"

It now seems likely that Buckley was in Cairo to train bodyguards for Anwar Sadat. But Buckley never talked about his work, and after a while, Hammond stopped asking.

"I know it sounds real strange to be a female and not be that curious, but I simply wasn't. To tell you the truth, it never bothered me. The relationship developed its own pattern. If he didn't want to talk about his work or anything, he did not necessarily want to hear about mine either."

"And we've just always been raised that if someone does not want you to mind their business, then you don't."

As their relationship progressed, she suggested trips together to other cities. "I had visions of taking cruises, and me buying a wardrobe. But he never would want to do it. He would say, 'No, I'll just come to Farmer.'"

William Buckley didn't want to go to Beirut. He announced his departure with his customary lack of fanfare. "He said he had tried to get out of it," Hammond says, "but he really did think he could do some good, and get everything straightened out."

"I don't know what he was going to do. By this time I had put stuff like this . . . it just wasn't in my realm of thinking. If he was going to go over there, it was for a good reason. I know he had complete confidence in himself."

She and her parents sometimes speculated about his business. "We would say, 'Well, he must have an important job,'" she says. "I still don't know if it was important enough to get himself killed for. He used to describe himself as just a little man doing his part."

Buckley arrived in Beirut in the summer of '83, about three months after a bomb shattered the U.S. Embassy and left at least 24 dead, including several CIA employees. The bombing of the Marine barracks at the Beirut airport was still several months away. He rented a 10th-floor penthouse apartment six blocks from the U.S. Embassy compound, in a once-fashionable neighborhood gone seedy and bomb scarred.

An experienced CIA officer who had served in Vietnam, among other places, Buckley often carried a walkie-talkie and went nearly every day to the headquarters of the Lebanese intelligence service. According to one report, he spent much of his time developing information that might prevent terrorist attacks on Americans in the Middle East and did not hire local contract agents for missions of violence. He reportedly was chosen for the assignment be-

cause he was unmarried and had no dependents.

Hammond tried to visit him in Beirut, once. In England, taking a landscape history course at Oxford, she wrote and suggested they meet halfway. "Like in Italy, or to let me come down there. But he said he was too busy to leave, and I *could not* come down there."

At the time, the curt rejection stung. "I mean, if I was going to be that close it seemed to me that he could cut everything off to visit a while . . . I always believe there's absolutely nothing you can't do. You just say screw it and go."

But if she wasn't welcome in his world, he had long taken strength from hers.

Farmer sits at the junction of two rural roads not far from Asheboro, which isn't too far from Greensboro. The surrounding hills are the worn remains of the ancient Uwharrie Mountains. New roads, and new people, from the booming cities of the Research Triangle (Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill) and the textile and manufacturing hub known as the Triad (Greensboro, Winston-Salem and High Point) have begun to encroach; there is even a small rush hour in the morning heading into High Point, and Candy Hammond's father Keith, a tall, handsome man

whom she calls Daddy Buck, says there's no place to run a hunting dog anymore.

It's still the country, though. Hammond's parents live just around the corner, and a great-aunt lives up the road. Locals include greetings to the postmaster when they send post cards home.

When Hammond met Buckley, she'd just come home to Farmer for good. She'd spent years away, studying fashion design in Manhattan, touring Europe and extricating herself from a brief marriage that hadn't worked out. She was renting a bungalow next door to the farmhouse she owns now. With its collections of antique shawls and dresses, hats and shoes, and the French provincial furniture she'd culled from flea markets, it was as ruffled as his place was restrained.

She used to pick him up at the Greensboro airport. "He was always the one who looked worried, tired and haggard, little mouth pressed together, eyes kind of drooping at the corners, whipping through the crowd."

They took the winding roads back, jostling along in her red pickup to the house at the rural crossroads where Hammonds have lived for the better part of two centuries.

"By the second day . . . he would start chattering and just wear me out," she says. He told her that he had grown up outside Boston, in a family she says he described as "lace-curtain Irish" (immigrants who have prospered), an expression that mystified her. He said he had worked as a librarian in Concord. He said he'd had a girlfriend once. As far as she knows, he'd never married. If he had, she says, "he certainly kept it to himself."

He was unhappy if his trips down to Farmer included too much socializing. "I took him with me to a friend of mine's birthday party in Greensboro one time, and he went kicking and screaming . . . He just didn't want to come down here and meet new people."

Instead, they prowled junk shops and ate at John's Tavern. He read spy novels. They avoided talk about politics. "He said he was to the right of Genghis Khan. The politicians he liked I always thought were absolute fools."

Compulsive in his own housekeeping—"The rubber bands were stored according to size; he was so neat that, you know, sometimes he'd take the teacup out of my hand and rinse it off and you'd have to say, 'I haven't finished having my tea, okay?'"—he tried to reform her.

He spent hours every visit washing the grime off her truck, using a toothbrush to clean where the sponge wouldn't reach. "He could be difficult and cranky and grouchy: 'You need to clean this room up, you need to sweep, who would ever paint that that color, you need to get out in the yard and get this done.' His arms would be going, do this, do that."

He called her bedroom "the icebox" and they used to argue about the piles of kindling he went through each time he built a fire.

He preferred her in dresses. "He loved me to dress up. You know, I haven't worn a dress since he left for Beirut. I don't look particularly good in them."

Was she in love? "Off and on; sometimes yes, and sometimes I would be saying, 'Who is this jerk?'" She says she wasn't interested in marriage, and "neither was he. He would give me a piece of jewelry and I would say, 'Why Bill, is this an engagement present?' and he would say, 'Not on your life.'"

She bought the old farmhouse after he left for Beirut. It was going to be a surprise. She's never used the dining room. "I was saving that for when he got back. I was going to fix him one of my wonderful meals that he used to make fun of."

Would he have liked it? "This house?" she says, looking at the sagging woodwork, the antique cupboards, shelves laden with treasures. "He would have criticized it from one end to the other and then he would have been very happy with all of it."

Beirut was cool and cloudy on the morning of March 16, 1984. Buckley left his apartment building at about 8 a.m. He started his car, but drove only a few yards before he was cut off by a Renault with three gunmen inside. A second car blocked the street further down the block. Buckley threw his car into reverse, according to witnesses, but was trapped at the dead-end. He did not put up a struggle when a gunman jumped from the Renault, put a pistol to his head and forced him into one of the two cars.

Buckley's kidnaping came just days after the abduction of Jeremy Levin, Beirut bureau chief for Cable News Network. Benjamin Weir, a Presbyterian minister, was seized two months later. The State Department continued to identify Buckley as a political officer at the U.S. Embassy, in the vain hope that his captors would not learn of his CIA connection.

Three months after his kidnaping, a videotape of Buckley, Levin and Weir was delivered

to the State Department by a secret emissary. It reportedly intensified the effort to find Buckley, which became a kind of crusade within the agency, and a personal preoccupation of William Casey.

In January of the next year, 1985, Buckley's captors released a videotape of Buckley alone that was shown on American television. On the tape he said that he, Weir and Levin were well and asked that "our government take action for our release quickly."

Candace Hammond watched the tape over and over that day, on the morning news shows, and later at night. "He was 1,000 years old in that picture," she says, and for the first time in a long interview her eyes reddened and she looks down. "He was holding a newspaper in front of him, with a date, and they said it was a plea for the hostages. He looked bad and he sounded hollow."

"Interesting thing about TV. You can sit there and watch it and you're so detached. It was like a recorded message."

In December 1985, a Jack Anderson column quoting CIA sources reported that Buckley had died in a Tehran hospital in June 1985 after suffering a heart attack brought on by prolonged torture and captivity. According to the Anderson column, he had been interrogated in Lebanon, Syria and finally in Tehran before his death.

Some senior CIA officials reportedly wept when they heard details of the torture.

In the first year, Hammond hoped. "It was lasting longer and longer, but I was positive that he would get out. He was one of those people so capable of taking care of himself that you just expect them to endure."

She pestered the State Department, relatives of other hostages and even the campaign headquarters of Jesse Jackson, pleading for information and help.

She gave her phone number to the wife of Jeremy Levin and asked that it be passed on to Buckley's sister. She never heard from the sister, but she was contacted by a man who identified himself as a longtime friend of Buckley's. She will not say his name, only that he told her he worked for the State Department. "He was one of those mythical friends. He said he had known Bill for years and he said Bill did have a lot of good friends who were rooting for him and trying every avenue available to them."

"This guy said that he had even asked to be sent over there to try and find Bill, but that they wouldn't do it . . ."

"And now it turns out that Jack Anderson . . ." her voice trails off. "Now of course, those people probably knew it at the time the Anderson story broke. I read the part about the torture . . ."

"It makes our little group seem pretty ineffectual doesn't it?" she says of the U.S. efforts to find and free Buckley. "You feel so terribly guilty and inadequate and stupid. Suddenly you

ask yourself why you don't have any important friends, why you have no power."

"You know, even though I realize that he's probably dead, and if he did come back he wouldn't be the same person, at the same time, in the back of your mind you keep thinking, waay-ull, maybe, maybe. I'm sure it's like the Vietnam MIA widows. I keep thinking, 'Well, it's a possibility.'"

Candace Hammond still drives her pickup home from High Point College each afternoon. She wheels into the driveway, greets the dogs, Sam and Tallulah, checks on Tallulah's four pups, then heads out back to milk the goat, her three cats wrapping themselves around her legs as she walks.

Nights in Farmer are cold this time of year. Frost clings to the windowpanes and the sky is a blackened bowl of stars. Just before dawn, white vapor begins to rise off the Uwharrie River. From a distance it looks as if a train has been by.

William Buckley's body has never been recovered. His sister, in Massachusetts, has said that she believes her brother could still be alive, and has dismissed as "absurd" reports that he broke down under torture. CIA director Casey last week said he was "99 percent sure" that Buckley was dead.

Hammond had her own memorial service a few months ago. "It was hokey," she says, looking down. "Yeah, it's just real hokey."

What she did was walk down to the riverbank and stand there a while. Then she tore up a letter and shredded a few flowers and watched them float downstream.